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ABSTRACT

Questionnaire and projective data from 323 women aged 18 to 50 were analyzed in order to study the relationships of need achievement and motive to avoid success to age, sex role ideology, and stage in the family cycle. Family background and educational variables were also considered. Level of need achievement was found to be significantly related to chronological age, with the highest scores obtained by women 35 to 50. Sex role views were not related to need to achieve except in women twenty years old and younger; young women holding contemporary views of woman's role tended to express high need to achieve. Level of need achievement was also related to the level of education already achieved and the level of education hoped for. Only 35% of the women in this study expressed fear of success; women holding traditional views of sex roles were most likely to show fear of success. Women in the two highest SES groups showed more fear of success than did women in the lower SES categories. Motive to avoid success was also related to women's stage in the family cycle, with single women expressing the most fear of success. (Author)

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TO ACHIEVE OR NOT TO ACHIEVE: THE QUESTION OF WOMEN[1]

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Attempts to extend the work on achievement motivation from male to female subjects have yielded results contrary to those studies done with males; they have also been contradictory among themselves. Matina Horner (1968) presented a new concept in an attempt to explain the discrepancy between results with male and female subjects. She postulated that in addition to the motives to achieve success and to avoid failure, a third motive, to avoid success, plays an especially important role in women's behavior. This motive differs from the motive to avoid failure by being aroused by the expectation that successful behavior will have negative consequences. These were assumed to be related to women's lack of typical femininity in achieving success; success could thus be a threat to a woman's identity and self-esteem as a woman, or in the view of others, could mark her as deserving social rejection. Anxiety, aroused by the prospect of these undesirable results of success, inhibits performance.

Horner postulated the importance of sex role attitudes in determining the effectiveness of the fear of success but did not directly investigate these in her research. It seems likely that a woman who views intellectual and leadership ability as inappropriate to her sex role would tend to have at least a latent fear of success when placed in a competitive situation.

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Horner points out that many achievement situations such as schools, colleges, business, politics, etc. involve both competition against a standard of excellence and against another person. A traditionally - oriented woman involved in any of those situations would be in a position inappropriate to her favored sex role. A woman, on the other hand, who sees her feminine role as including possibilities for intellectual and leadership abilities would presumably be unaffected by fear of success in Horner's terms. Thus sex role orientation seems to be a very important area to consider in assessing women's need to achieve, in addition to her need to avoid success.

Several studies (French and Lesser, 1964; Lesser, Krawitz and Packard, 1963; Sundheim, 1962; Lipinsky, 1965) have pointed to the importance of sex role values in influencing women's activities but their attempts to compare role concepts and need achievement have resulted in unclear relationships between the variables.

Other variables have also been suggested as important to women's achievement motivation. Neugarten (1962, 1968) theorized that as individuals go through life their personalities and motives may change. Bernard (1972) cites many studies which indicate changes in many women after marriage; these appear to be results of social expectations involved in the mothering role which militate against satisfaction of individual desires outside that role. Fluctuations of marital satisfaction of women have been linked to stages in the family life cycle, particularly with the age of the children (Burr, 1970; Rollins and Feldman, 1970). Baruch (1967) in a study of Radcliffe graduates and others, found that need achievement was at a high level in pre-child-bearing women, decreased for women who were primarily concerned with raising young children, and increased again for women whose children were of school-age or older.

In summary, previous research indicates that women's need to achieve is probably related to several variables which interact to influence both performance and the expression of fantasy about achievement. The foremost of these variables appear to be those related to psychosocial issues in development: attitude towards women's role and motive to avoid success. In addition the position of the woman in her family cycle was here suggested to be important. Other factors felt to be relevant or to interact with these variables were a woman's chronological age, her educational level, and the socio-economic status of her father's family.

Subjects and procedure: Data were collected from 323 white women, who were interviewed by students enrolled in three psychology courses at Illinois Institute of Technology. Subjects were selected by the students, who were instructed to request cooperation from women between the ages of 18 and 50 who were American citizens. Data were also collected from an additional group of women who attended a suburban meeting on life styles for women. About one-third of the women were 18 to 20 years of age; 26% were over thirty. The educational level of the subjects varied, with the largest percentage of women going to or having gone to college, but with over one fourth having attended high school only. Occupations of working women centered around clerical and sales jobs, or bing a housewife. Slightly more than half of the subjects were single. The group was primarily middle and lower-middle class.

Each subject received a two-part questionaire, one part including projective measures of need acheivement and need to avoid success and the other part being a structured survey of background data and sex role attitudes. The projective part of the questionaire consisted of a set of five written sentences and questions to elicit stories based on them; these sentence cues were similar to those used by Horner in her original study on the motive to avoid success. Stories written to the first four

cue sentences were coded for need achievement according to the content analysis system of Atkinson (1958). Stories written to the fifth cue were scored for the motive to avoid success according to Horner's criteria; they were considered to reflect fear of success if they involved negative imagery about success in any of six categories described by her. The sex role attitudes of the women were judged by responses to Blumen's (1971) six-item scale. This scale was developed to tap two aspects of the female role: one involved task-sharing between husband and wife and the other related to women's behavior outside marriage. According to their responses to the various measures women were categorized as high, medium, or low in need to achieve, as having or not having fear of success, and as being traditional, contemporary or mixed in their sex role ideology. Data were also collected on demographic and occupational variables, family background, educational variables, and life goals.

Results. The incidence of motive to avoid success stories was far lower than that found by Horner. In her study she found that more than 62% of the women told fear of success stories; here 35% of the women told such stories. The only group of women in this study who responded as Horner's subjects had were college age women holding traditional sex role attitudes. We know nothing of the sex role ideology of Horner's subjects, but their age group was roughly the same. Several studies since Horner have suggested the importance of deviation from accepted sex role achievement norms in determining the existence or amount of fear of success. This study suggests that the judgment of deviance is dependent on holding traditional views of the proper fields in which women may achieve.

No overall relationship was found between age and need to avoid success. There was, however, an apparent interaction between age and need to avoid success within the traditionally oriented women. Older women with traditional sex role attitudes were less likely to give fear of success

stories than the younger women with traditional sex role attitudes. I suspect that this may be related to their having already achieved success in traditional terms: through marriage and child rearing.

Level of need achievement was found to be significantly related to chronological age, with the highest scores obtained by the oldest group of women (age 35 to 49) and the lowest scores by women 25 to 34 years old. This pattern is similar to that found by Baruch in her study of Radcliffe graduates and of other women. The indication here is that the older the woman, the less importance she give to sex role standards of achievement and the less she fears success. She is perhaps both more interested in achieving and less concerned about losing femininity doing so.

Horner assumed that the motive to avoid success has its roots in sex role standards. This assumption is strengthened by the results of this study, which found sex role ideology to be significantly related to the occurrence of stories with fear of success present. Over one-half of the women holding traditional sex role concepts showed motive to avoid success, compared to roughly one-third of the mixed and contemporary sex role groups.

The importance of sex role orientation to need achievement has been suggested by several researchers but results of the various studies have not been clearcut. In the current study no overall relationship was found between the two variables. However, in women below twenty need achievement was significantly related to sex role ideology. For this group of women, which is roughly the age group tested by previous researchers, this study provides a confirmation of the hypotheses relating sex role attitudes and need to achieve. As expected, within this group of women those with the most contemporary view of woman's role were highest on the need achievement measure.

Why was this relationship apparent only in the younger women and not true of the women between 35 and 49, for instance? A possible explanation

is that these late adolescent and young adult women are the most likely of the women studied to be concerned with defining their role as women. In Erikson's term, they are in a psychosocial moratorium. They are in that phase of development which is in effect a waiting period, a delay before taking up adult functions, and they are weighing options, trying out alternatives, and facing societal restraints and demands on their behaviors. Much of this forging of a personal identity involves their adjustment to societal expectations of women. It seems reasonable that sex role views favoring non-traditional woman's roles should be accompanied by higher achievement needs, achievement in a leadership and academic sense being non-traditional for women. On the other hand, young women with views of woman's role as carrying the traditional burdens of housework and childbearing tend to shun the masculine activities implied in the measure of the need to achieve. Women over twenty, most of them past college age, may have resolved their concerns over woman's role to such an extent that their views on it are no longer tied in with other needs such as achievement. These women may feel able to accept ambiguities in their life styles, to achieve in areas other than "masculine" ones, or simply to ignore social prescriptions for behavior in favor of expressing more personalized needs.

In order to look into this more, I wondered if we could explain the greater need for achievement in middle aged women by their stage in their family cycle. Five categories were determined on the basis of marital status, motherhood, and views on whether marriage was desirable or not; these categories ranged from (1) women who were single and felt marriage was undesirable to (5) women who were married and had children, but none under six, and who planned to have no more (i.e., had a completed family). No relationship was found between level of need achievement and stage in family cycle. However, a significantly high percentage of women with

children (28%) were found to have high need achievement scores when compared to the women without children (17%). It seems possible that the older women, having met the standards of their sex roles, i.e., having married and had children, are now more comfortable with the idea of achieving.

On the other hand, family cycle was related to motive to avoid success. Single women showed the highest rate of fear of success imagery and married women who are mothers showed the least. This may be interpreted as supporting Horner's contention that motive to avoid success is highest in the women most likely to succeed: here, the single women who are in school or in the job market. An alternative explanation might be that the single women are threatened by success because of their position in terms of psychosocial development. They are conflicted about their sex role ideals, personal goals, and social demands, and this is reflected in their (relatively) high fear of success imagery compared to the more stable, less conflicted married mothers.

Need to achieve was not found to be related to several measures of family background. It was, however, directly related to levels of education already achieved by women or anticipated by them. College educated women were found to have higher levels of need achievement than non-college educated women. It is not clear from the data in this study whether need achievement determines educational level or is determined by it. If, however, educational level is viewed as a measure of performance over an extended period of time, as such it may be dependent on level of need achievement. It may be that women's performance level may best be judged over such a period of time rather than in the short, more obviously competitive performance tasks which have usually been found to be unrelated to women's need achievement.

Socio-economic status was related to fear of success. Women of upper and upper-middle class status show more fear of success than do women of

middle and lower classes. Neither group, as such, gave a majority of responses in the fear of success category, but the proportion of such was higher in the more upper class group than in the other. The upper class women did not differ in other ways from the other women of the sample. Many of the speculations advanced to account for the high need achievement level in upper class men might also be applicable to this group of women: they may be more intelligent and healthy than other women, they may have more opportunities to reach high positions, their families may value and stress achievement. Regardless of whether or not these women show high need to achieve success, the cumulative pressures for it might be substantial. However, they might also be countered by expectations that the women would support a spouse's high need to achieve by encouraging his advancement rather than their own. Thus these women may both be more able to reach goals on their own and yet feel more social pressure that they not do so. This could lead to anxiety over success.

Conclusions. The findings of this study on the relation of age to the need to achieve and to avoid success suggest that these characteristics are only relatively stable over time. Increasing age, or increasing family responsibilities, change these characteristics as they change others. In this case they alter the need to achieve and to avoid success from standards of differentiated sex roles to a more androgynous position. Traditionally women have been considered non-competitive and have been frowned on if they were aggressive. The women in this study not only desire to achieve but they are not deterred from the idea of doing so by the fear of social sanctions.

Both the concepts of motive to achieve and motive to avoid success need to be expanded to include the possibility of their change over time.

Indications here are that need to achieve is not confined to younger women, that it is especially active in women middle aged and up, some of whom are returning to college or seeking jobs now that their children are

grown. This is not a phenomenon found in achievement-oriented Radcliffe graduates alone but also in a broader sample of women who are more typical of women throughout the country. Similarly, motive to avoid success may be prevalent in women who have concerns of identity formation present in their minds (the typical college coed) but not in women who have achieved some form of identity through additional years of living or through the achievement of marriage and a family.

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